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ABSTRACT

For many years flowers and leaves formed the bulk of Alaskan Athabascan beadwork designs. Early Athabascan beadwork consisted primarily of simple geometric patterns, but after the advent of the French in Canada, elaborate floral designs popular in 18th and 19th century France were translated into Woodland Indian beadwork. In traditional procedure a sharp stick dipped into a flour and water paste traced the design onto a leather backing. Porcupine quills, seed beads, or beads from the local trader were sewn with moose sinew directly onto the backing. Two stitches, the lazy stitch and the overlay, could be used, and Alaskan Athabascans chose the overlay which employed two threads. One thread was used to string the beads; the other whipped the bead string onto the backing. The ancient procedures and designs are still in use today, although needles, white sewing thread, white felt or velvet, commercial beads and ink pens have replaced the more traditional materials. Drawing upon the expertise of two Athabascan artisans, this document relates their procedures for doing beadwork and gives beginning, intermediate and advanced beadwork designs. Photographs of finished work are also included. An excerpt from "Alaskan Athabascan Beadwork" by Kate Duncan discusses the craft and its history and describes beadwork styles characteristic of particular villages or areas. (DS)

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ATHABASCAN BEADING

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ATHABASCAN BEADING

Beading patterns by Effie Kokrine.
Text by Lilly Pitka and Annabelle Towarak.

Photos by Bruce Dunkle and Jody Smith.
Illustrations by LindaMae Scolman.

Edited by Pat DeMarco.

1978

INTRODUCTION

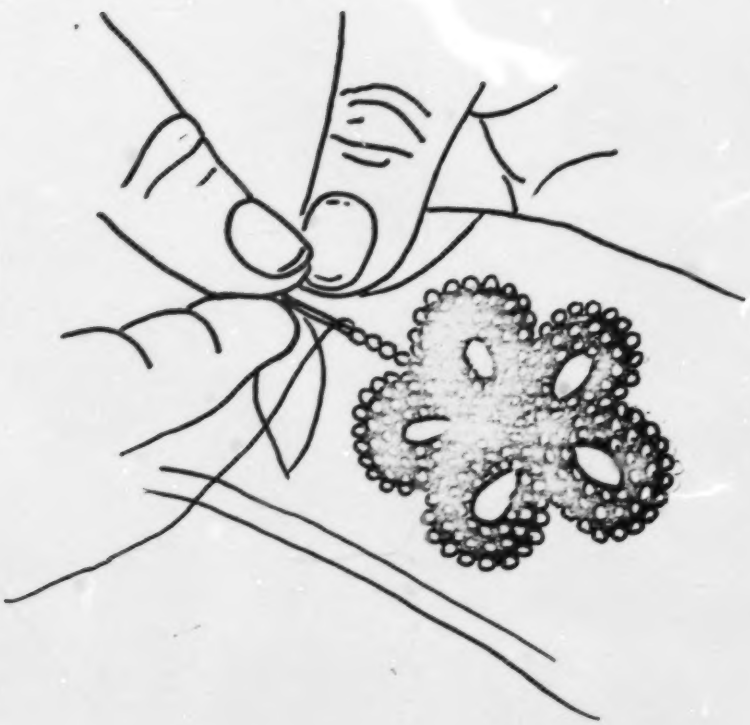
Learning how to sew beads is not one of the easiest sewing tasks to learn. It helps to be patient and not be too tense. Just relax - that makes it easy. One thing to be careful of is not to crowd the beads together as it makes the work look sloppy. It also causes the beads to cut the threads and your beads will start to fall off.

Some women sew beads faster than others. All it takes is your imagination in putting the colors and patterns together. Beading can be a lot of fun.

When I was a child, one of our legends was that having plenty of sewing materials and tools to hunt and trap with were very important. That was a sign that the people were not lazy. Beads were an important possession.

The staff of the Fairbanks Native Association - Johnson O'Malley Program (FNA - JOM) wishes to thank Lilly Pitka and Effie Kokrine for thir help in providing material for this book. Lilly originally was from Stevens Village but grew up in Ft. Yukon. Effie was born and raised in Tanana. Their work reflects the creativity and superb workmanship of Athabascan beadwork artists.

--Agnes Mayo Moore



BEADING

by

LILLY PITKA

(Transcribed from an interview, July, 1978 - edited by Pat DeMarco)

My mother, Bella Luke, taught me how to sew with beads. My first beadwork was done when I was 14 years old. I decorated dog blankets. My mother made the blankets for me because I couldn't sew fabrics yet. She made the blankets out of felt and velvet; then she drew the beading patterns on for me. She used a thin willow or piece of dry birch dipped in a mixture of flour and water to draw on the design. I threaded the beads on real small moose sinew that she had made. Then my mother showed me how to put the beads together and sew the sinew down with another needle threaded with cotton thread or whatever. I don't remember how long it took me to finish the beadwork. I remember using long bead needles. Nowadays I use short ones and feel uncomfortable using long ones.

On the dog blanket I did the outlines of the designs first then the long borders and the curlicue designs last because they were the hardest. I used any color beads. The blue ones look gray now because they have faded. Bead colors today won't fade as much as those old beads.

My mother used her own patterns on these blankets but I have my own now. Most women have their own. Sometimes you can tell where a piece came from and who made it just by looking at the pattern.

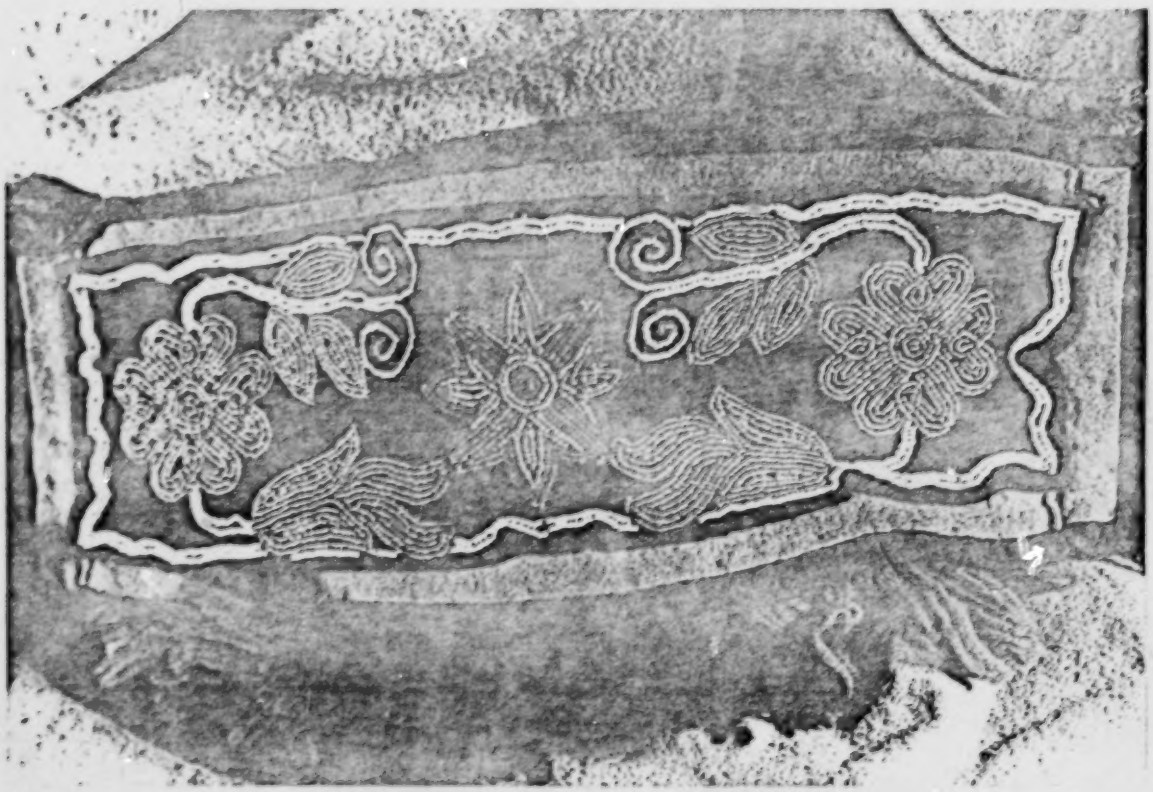
I used seed beads and cut beads on the dog blankets. We used to buy them in hanks from the store in Fort Yukon. My mother had a lot of them. When Fort Yukon flooded in 1949, she carried her beads with her when she climbed on top of our neighbor's house to wait out the flood.

When I do beadwork now, I decide what my background will be for the piece I want to make. Sometimes I use felt, velvet or when I can get it, thin moosehide. Then I draw on my design with a pencil or pen, a red pen is the best one. When I sew beads on green cloth, I use a blue ink pen to draw on the pattern. I use two needles, with double machine thread - one to string the beads on and one to sew them down. I put brown paper behind the pattern and sew through that. It makes the pattern stiffer to sew through. When I sew on the pattern then I line it with cloth so you don't feel the paper. On most designs I outline it first in beads and then use beads to fill in. The white backgrounds are put on last.

I can remember my mother using porcupine quills for decoration. She used to take colored pencils, cut them up and put them in water, stir till dissolved and then put the quills in and soak them. She flattened them when she started to sew with them. I tried too, when I was 12 but I quit. I was doing fine though when I started. When you get used to doing it, it's not too hard; but when you first start out, it's hard.

When I was 14, I also helped my mother sew on a chief's coat for Jacob Luke that's now at the University of Alaska Museum in Fairbanks. They are made different now. Beads are sewn right on the moosehide. We sewed ours on fabric first and then sewed that onto the coat.

I enjoy my beadwork. I make jackets and sew designs on them. I make boots, slippers, jewelry, hair pieces and purses. I put beadwork on all of them. I start early in the morning and quit when I get tired. It's lots of fun for me and helps to pass the time.



Beadwork by Lilly Pitka.

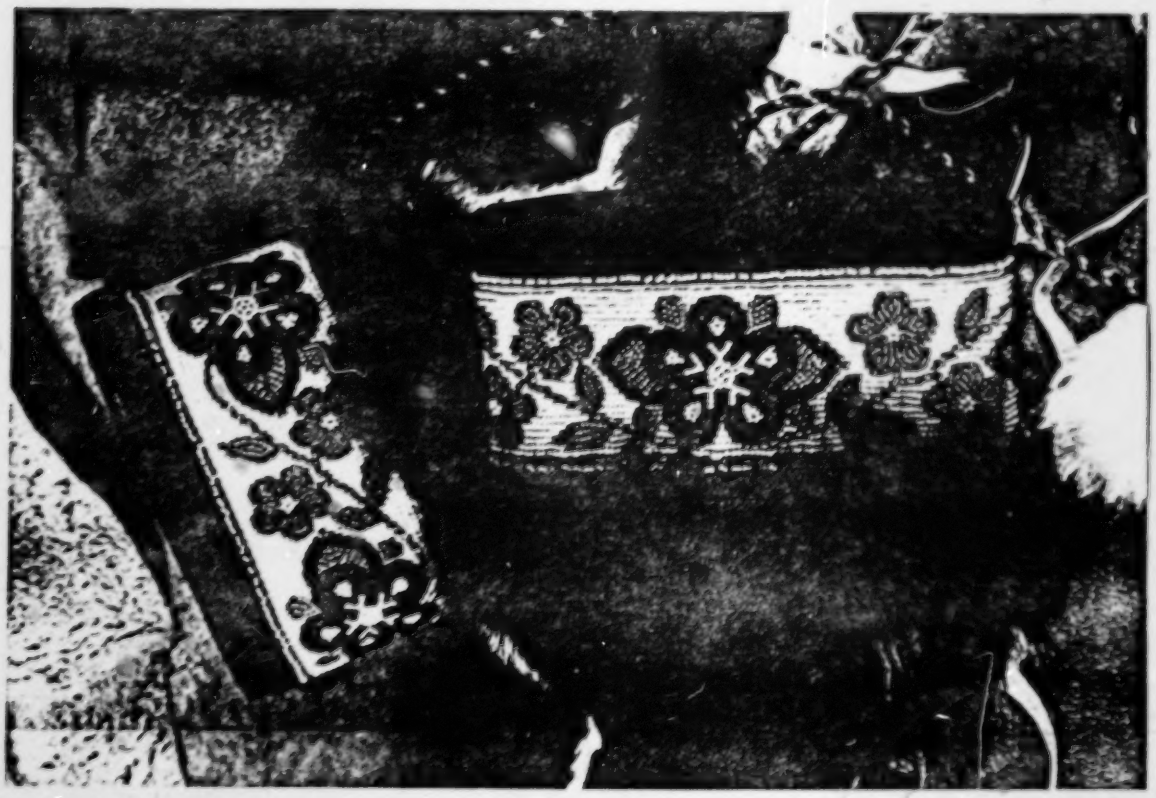
ATHABASCAN BEADWORK

Excerpts from "Alaskan Athabascan Beadwork"
by Kate Duncan

Alaska Journal - Spring, 1977

Until recently, beads were most often sewn directly onto the item to be decorated. In Alaska, hide has been the usual backing. Occasionally, strips of trade wool were beaded, then appliqued to a mitten or down the front of a man's coat. Today, easy-to-handle, easily available white felt is a popular backing. When used, a piece of brown paper sewn through behind helps to hold the felt in shape. When felt is used the entire background of the design is beaded on with white beads so as to cover the felt.

Sinew was the traditional thread. The sinew itself was sharp enough to provide a point on which to string the beads, but an awl was necessary to pierce the leather. Today, needles and commercial white thread are used.

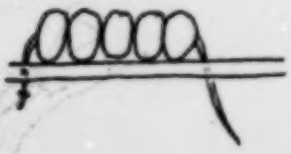


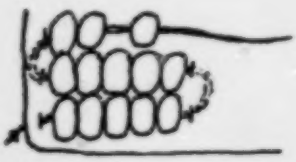
Beadwork by Lilly Pitka.

STITCHES

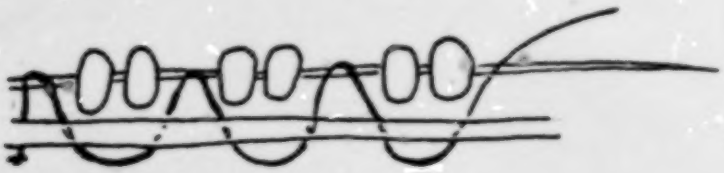
The two most common stitches used by North American Indians for bead embroidery are the overlay stitch and the lazy stitch. The overlay stitch has been used by Alaskan Athabascans and by eastern Woodlands tribes. The lazy stitch has been preferred by most Plains tribes.

LAZY STITCH. For the lazy stitch method a stitch is taken in the backing, a group of beads is strung on the thread and laid in a straight line onto the leather. Then another stitch is taken to secure the line of beads. Large areas are often beaded in this fashion, with the securing stitches placed in horizontal lines.





OVERLAY STITCH. For the overlay stitch the artisan strings a segment of beads on her second needle and thread to make a tiny stitch usually between every two beads over the thread on which the beads are strung and into the backing. The stitches may or may not show on the back side of the leather. If they do show, as when fabric or felt are beaded, a fabric lining often covers them. Using this overlay stitch, the beadworker can create almost any shape and can texture it by placement of lines of beads.



DESIGNS

When beading her design, the Alaskan Athabascan first outlines a form with a thread of beads. If it is her intention to fill it in, she does so, working inward, usually placing a line of beads against the outline and so works from the center of the layout outward in several directions. If the background is to be beaded solid, this is the last part to be worked.

If there are two matching items to be beaded, such as a pair of moccasins or mittens, symmetry is important. To achieve this, the design outlines are often beaded onto one of the pair. This is then placed directly onto its mate and pressure is applied. The resulting indentation is then drawn in.

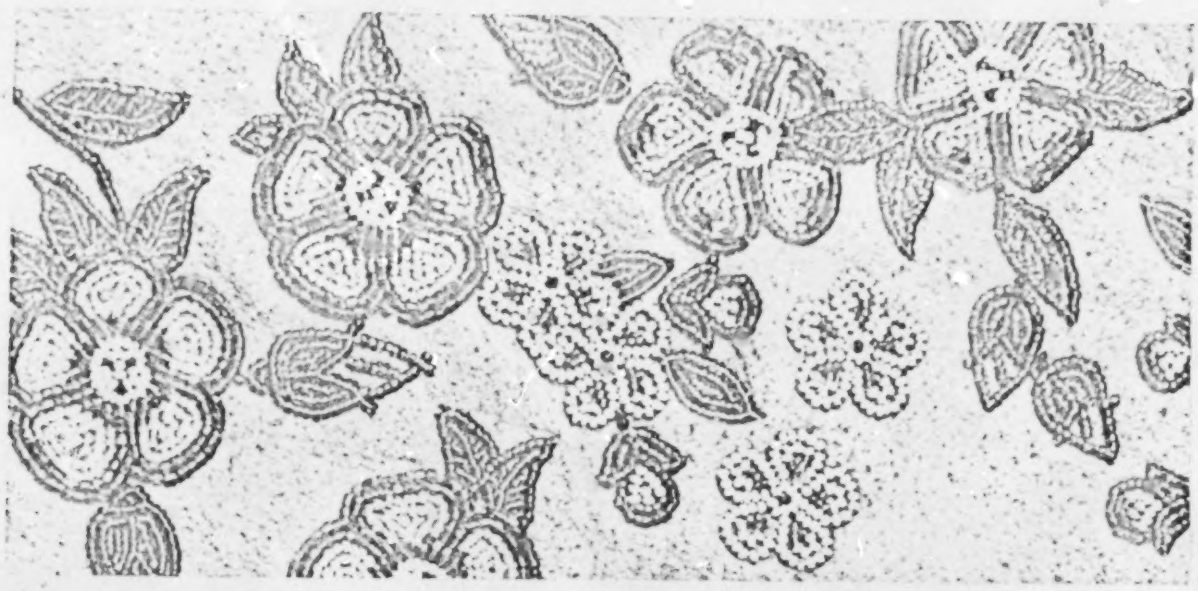
The Athabascan beadworker often keeps a box of patterns. Originally, these were of birch bark; now they are of paper. The beadworker combines the patterns as it suits her fancy and draws around them. Her imagination is important in the creation of her designs, and some beadworkers prefer not to use patterns. In the past, the pattern outline on the leather or fabric was made with thin lines of flour-and-water paste applied with a sharp stick. Once available, thread came into use and the design was outlined in small stitches. Now a pencil or pen is used.

The first designs used on Athabascan beadwork were combinations of blocks, triangles, and crosses similar to those accomplished in quill work. Murray's 1847-48 report from Fort Yukon pictures men wearing trousers with alternating red and white squares down the side seams. A pair of trousers collected by Sheldon Jackson sometime before 1888 exhibits a pattern of multicolored triangles.

Floral patterns, however, soon displaced geometric ones. The origin of floral designs among the Athabascans of Alaska and Canada is not completely clear. Some historians explain them as originally having been French -inspired since French mission schools in eastern Canada taught the Indian girls to embroider after popular French models. Thus, the elaborate floral designs popular in 18th and 19th century France were translated in beads and silk thread by Woodlands groups. The designs are thought then to have moved westward.

In fact Athabascan art at the time of contact appears to have been very limited and to have consisted almost solely of simple geometric quill designs on skin clothing. Perhaps this explains in part the eager reception of the floral designs in use farther east. The Athabascans have always been receptive to ideas introduced from elsewhere.

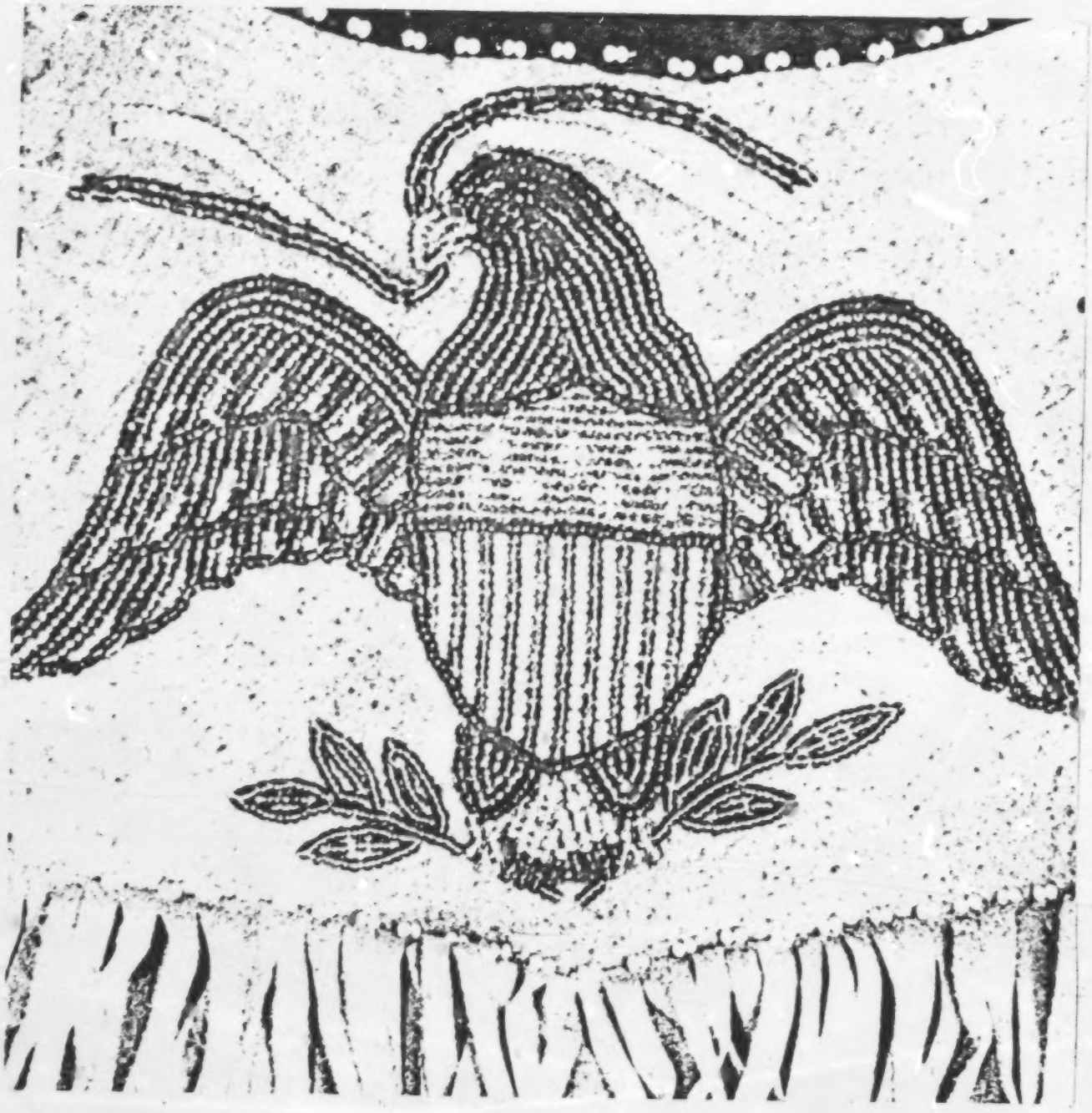
Flowers and leaves, form the bulk of Alaskan Athabascan beadworkers's design, but there is variety. Some flowers suggest specific Alaskan plants such as the wild rose and the forget-me-not, but most are not identifiable. Truth to life is not important and a variety of leaves, blossoms and berry forms of many colors may be attached to the same stem. Stems are white or dark and often feature single bead dots on either side which seem to suggest the thorns of plants such as the wild rose. Leaves are usually pointed, with one bead at the end to sharpen the point. Petals are rounded or pointed.



Beadwork by Effie Kokrine.

Specific models for motifs seem to have been anything available with a design that appealed to the beadworker. In the University of Alaska Museum collection there are examples of strawberries, pansies and butterflies, as well as a variety of generalized flower and leaf forms. Certain designs featuring large, decorated hearts suggest that valentines may have been the model.

The official American eagle was a popular motif during the early part of the 20th century, especially in villages where United States Army posts were established. It is pictured on items such as wall hangings, carrying pouches, purses and gloves. The five pointed star was also copied from the uniforms.



Beadwork by Effie Kokrine.

Today sources for motifs are broader than during the early part of the century, but stylized floral forms remain the most popular.

Generalizations may be made about color and design preferences from village to village. Athabascan beadworkers have always used a wide variety of colors.

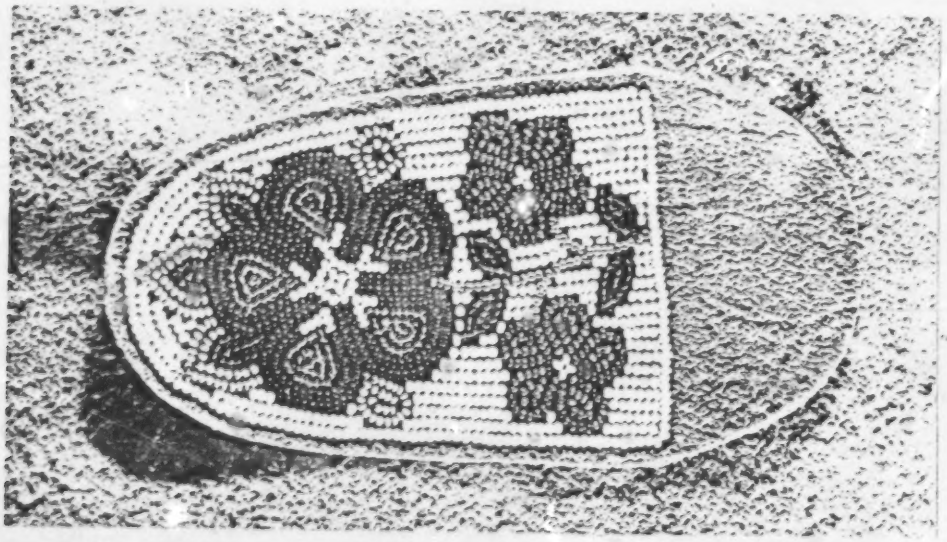
Petal and leaf forms seem to have sharper points and to be slightly more realistic around the villages of Tanana, Rampart and Ft. Yukon. Early 20th century work from the village of Tanana shows a preference for compound forms of triangles, hearts, or stylized bluebells shapes fit together in a string. Some but fewer of these forms have been used in Rampart, a bit to the east.

Work from Rampart from the first half of the 20th century can usually be identified by its use of a few subdued colors and by certain design preferences such as tiny, two-colored forget-me-nots with petals of but a single outline of beads.

Beadwork from Eagle features some of the same subdued colors as that from Rampart but with more use of yellow.

Beadworkers from Ft. Yukon have been prolific throughout this century and their work is typically of high quality. Early designs are compact, intricate patterns of blossoms, leaves, stems and tendrils, and incorporate a wide variety of colors. The later Ft. Yukon work exhibits simpler designs using larger motifs with fewer colors. Backgrounds beaded in white are almost always present in this later work.

During the 20th century, design preferences in Alaska and western Canada seem to have moved toward simplification. Some beadworkers now indicate that complex designs take too much time to work.

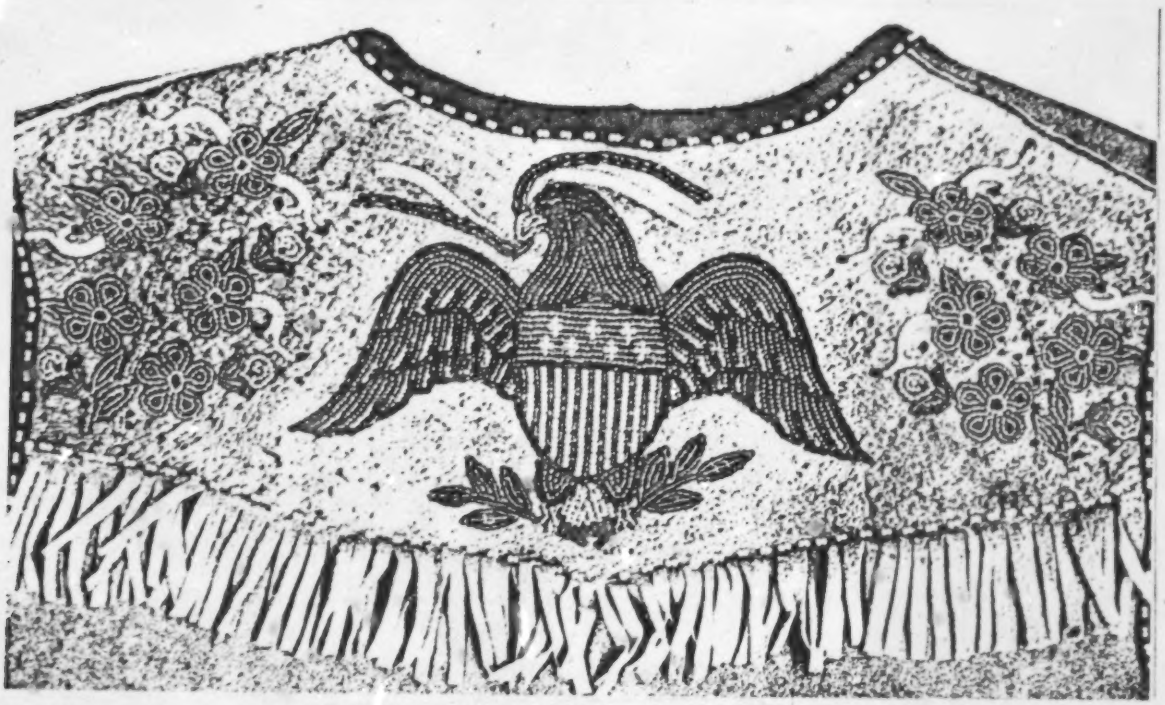


Beadwork by Lilly Pitka.

Steps to Complete Beadwork

1. Decide what the beadwork will be for: dress, gloves, jewelry, etc.
2. Choose the type of pattern (floral patterns, straight or curving lines, geometric patterns, etc.) you think would fit best as a design.
3. Consider colors and choose your beads accordingly.
4. Draw the basic patterns on the material you choose. If the material is lightweight, use a backing, either pellon or brown paper bag. The beads will then lay more uniform and neat.
5. Plan the direction the beads will lay with regard to the outline.

6. Complete beading the outline and then fill in.



Beadwork by Effie Kokrine.

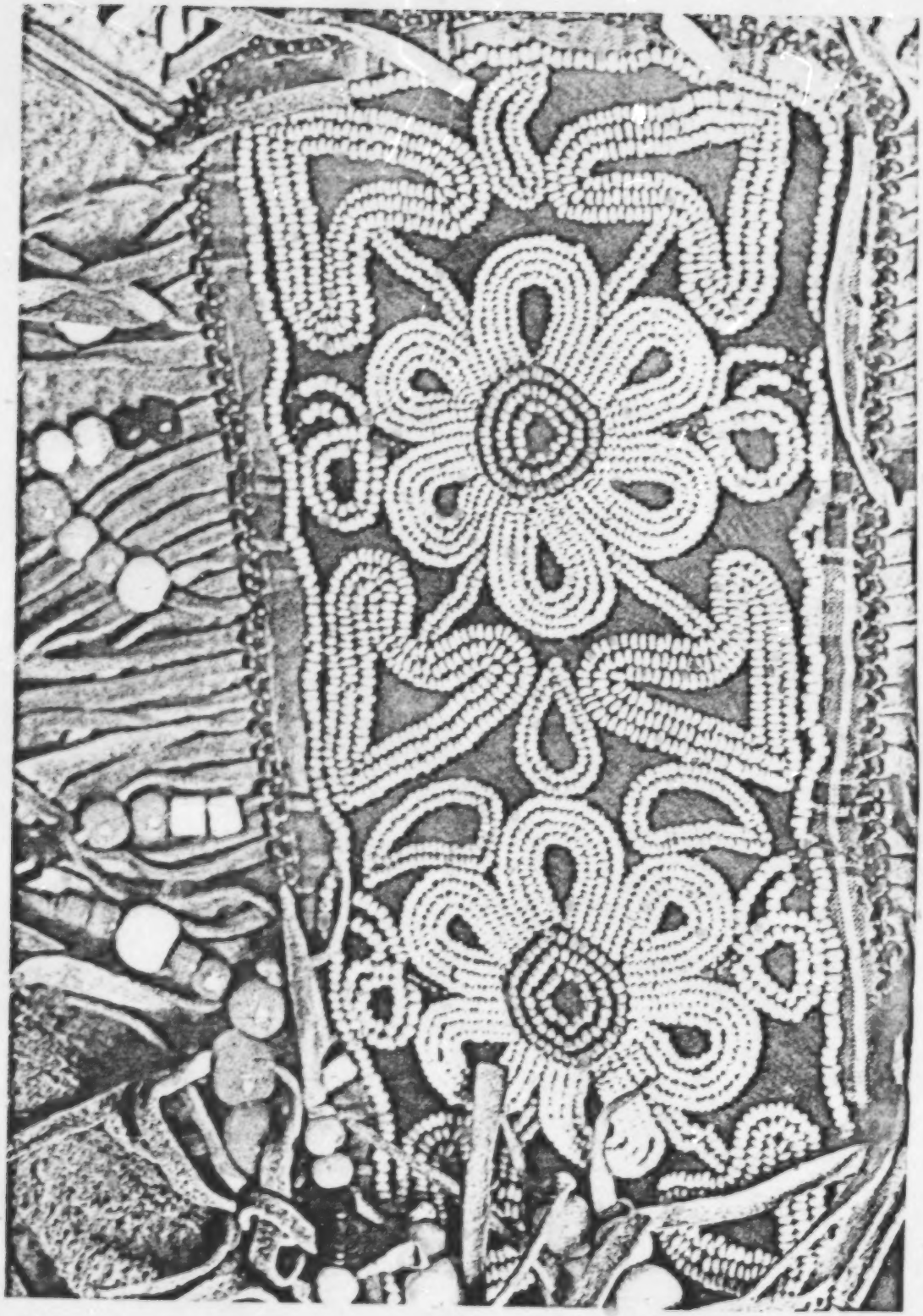
Hints to Consider

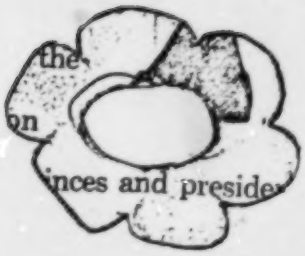
---Thread the beading line directly from the string of beads you bought by placing the needle through the eyes of the beads and pulling them through the beading string.

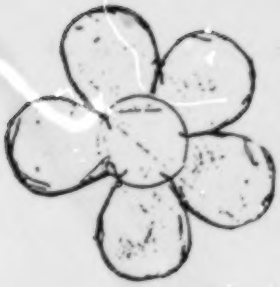
---Use short lengths of thread for beading. If ever a long thread broke, a long line of beads would be lost. Shorter threads do not tangle as easily.

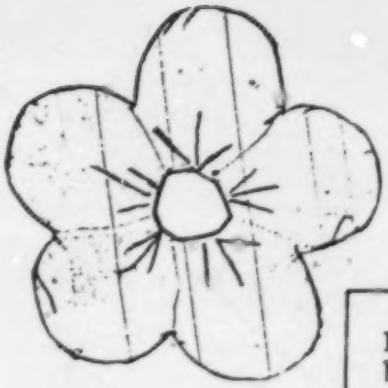
---As in regular sewing, there is a chance of making mistakes. Instead of trying to hide the mistake, start over again.

---The tighter the beaded thread is pulled and sewn down, the closer the beads are to one another. The design will be beautiful.



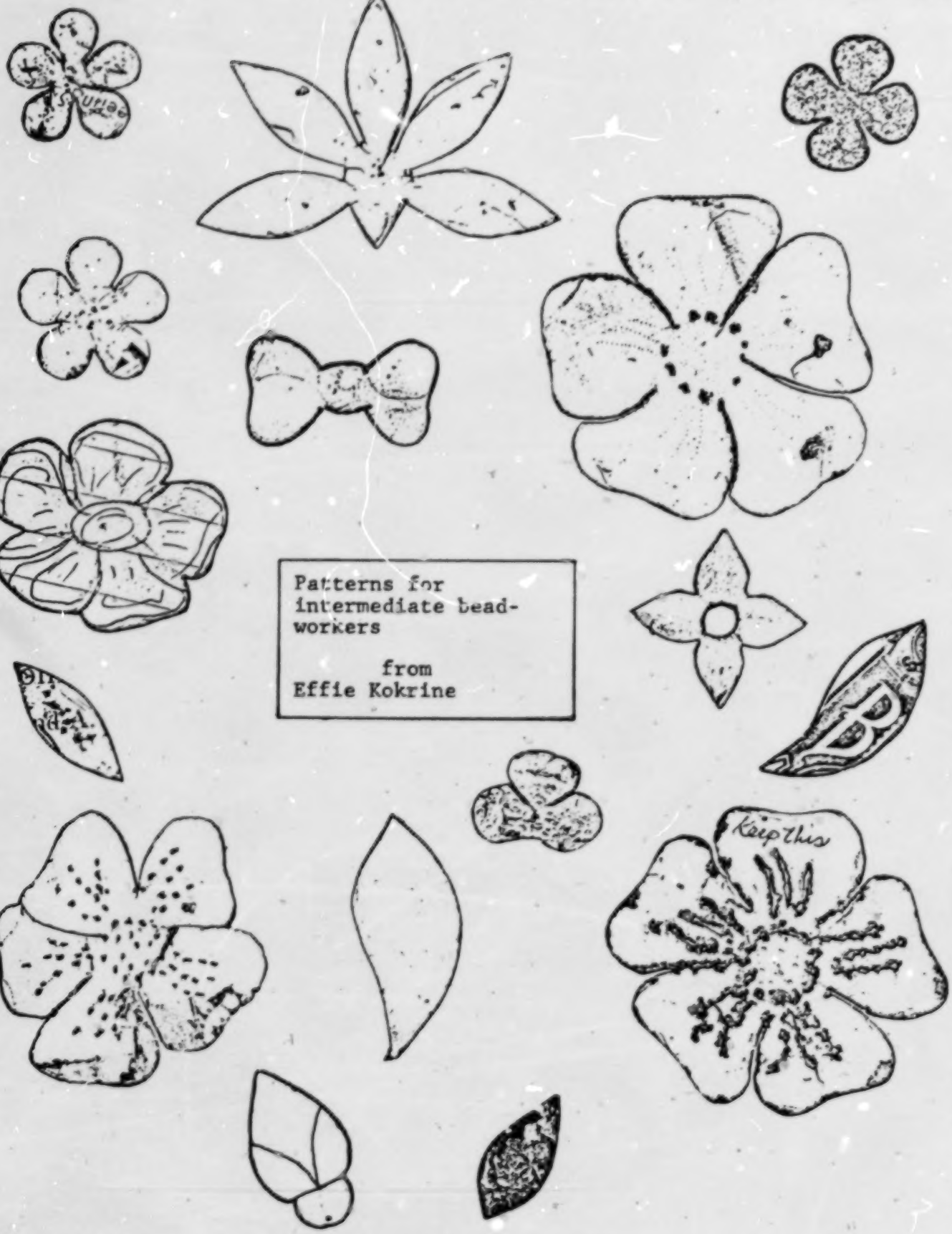






Patterns for
beginning beadworkers

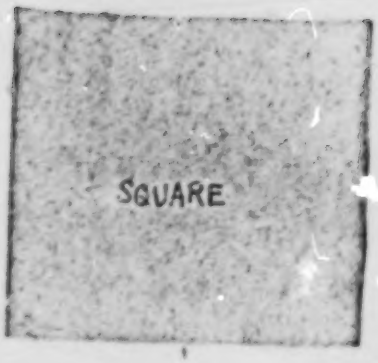
from
Effie Kokrine


Patterns for
intermediate bead-
workers
from
Effie Kokrine
Keep this

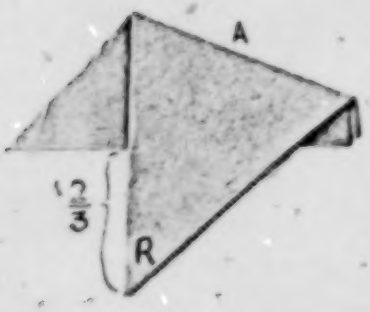
Patterns for
advanced beadworkers

from
Effie Kokrine

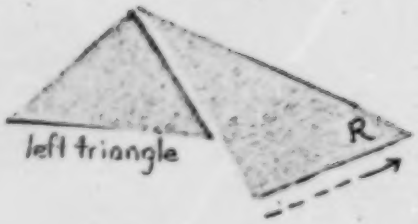
DIRECTIONS FOR A FIVE-PETAL FLOWER



1) Fold a SQUARE piece of paper crosswise

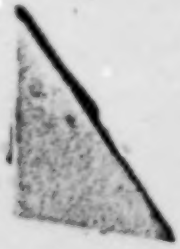


2) Fold the right end so that 2/3 is over the edge



3) Fold the right end back so that it is even with fold A

4) Fold the left triangle back so that the edges are even



5) Fold the right triangle towards your left so that there are three even folds

6) Turn over
Cut a curve on the right FOLDS upwards toward the left folds. Clip the tip.

7) Finished product

ATHABASCAN BEADING EXPERTS

Katherine Anderson - Fairbanks

Poldine Carlo - Fairbanks

Francis Cummings - Fort Yukon

Marian James - Fort Yukon

Effie Kokrine - Fairbanks

Exenia Felix McLean - Fort Yukon

Agnes Mayo Moore - Fairbanks

Katherine Peter - Fairbanks

Lilly Pitka - Fairbanks

Cora Smith - Fairbanks

Hannah Soloman - Fairbanks

Dorothy Titus - Minto

RESOURCE LIST

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Beadwork by Lilly Pitka.